IF YOU'RE GOING, I'M GOING WITH YOU
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Psalm 51:1–12
1 Corinthians 1:18–25
John 12:20–32

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,
will draw all people to myself."
John 12:32 (NRSV)

The theology of the cross is nevertheless first of all a statement about God, and what it says about God is not that God thinks humankind so wretched that it deserves death and hell, but that God thinks humankind and the whole
creation so good, so beautiful, so precious in its intention and potentiality, that its actualization, its fulfillment, its redemption is worth dying for.

Douglas John Hall
The Cross in Context:
Jesus and the Suffering World

For centuries this Sunday, the fifth in Lent, was known as Passion Sunday, the day when Christian people were invited to think about and pay particular attention to the central symbol of their faith, the cross—not always an easy task.

In his new book, *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills argues that there is a significant difference between the Jesus of popular piety—the Jesus whose face shows up on T-shirts, the Jesus of the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets—and the Jesus of the New Testament.

Here is how Wills describes the Jesus of the Bible:

> He preferred the company of the lonely and despised. . . . He crossed lines of ritual impurity to deal with the unclean, the lepers, the possessed, the insane, the prostitutes and adulterers, and collaborators. . . . He was called a bastard. . . . He had a lower-class upbringing . . . chose his followers from the lower class. . . . Jesus not only favored the homeless, he was himself homeless. . . . He was in constant danger of being arrested and assassinated. . . was called an

> agent of the devil . . . consorter with loose women, a glutton and a drunkard. . . . The puzzled disciples trotted behind, trying to make sense of what seemed to them inexplicable, squabbling among themselves about what he was up to. It would never have occurred to them to wear a WWJD bracelet. (“Foreword: Christ Not a Christian”)

What Jesus did was pretty much challenge everybody, every established institution—including his own religion—and from beginning to end, he walked steadfastly in a direction opposite from the direction everybody else was walking. Instead of protecting himself and guaranteeing his future security, he seemed intentionally to make himself vulnerable. Instead of building his resume, bank account, and social standing, he seemed intent on spending out his life in the present tense. Instead of teaching how to get ahead, he said disconcerting things like “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Instead of teaching how to be successful and content, well-adjusted and happy, he said things like, “Those who love their life, lose it.” And then, incredibly, he put it all on the line, walked directly into danger, walked willingly—apparently—to his death, died, even though he did not have to, did, that is to say, that most counterintuitive act imaginable: laid down his own life.

Garry Wills wonders whether young people who wear WWJD bracelets or cross necklaces and earrings ever think of that.

A friend of mine, member of this church who used to write for *Time* magazine and now teaches English at Michigan State, sent me a paper one of his students produced for a writing class. The assignment was to write about an object, any object. The title of the paper is “The Cross I Wore.” Bill said he thought it might preach. It’s a very good paper. The young man describes the small, simple pewter cross he used to wear on a string around his neck. He liked his cross. And then he learned about crucifixion, learned that it was “a form of torture for criminals, foreigners, and slaves—as a demonstration of what would happen to anyone who defied Rome’s powerful empire.” He goes into considerable graphic detail about crucifixion, how it was carried out, how the victim died. He learned about the scorn and ridicule and humiliation that were a part of it. And his simple little pewter cross became suddenly heavier. He wrote,

> It had become a meaningless part of my everyday uniform: shirt, pants, shoes, and cross. However, I continued to live my comfortable middle-class American life with no regard for what hung from my neck. Eventually the small piece of jewelry became heavier. The harder I tried to forget about what it stood for the heavier my cross became. . . . Finally, I couldn’t take it any more. I pulled off the black string, with the small cross, and tossed it into my bag.”

He replaced the heavy cross with a string of beads that were less powerful, not as heavy, not so cumbersome.

You can't have Christianity without the cross.

Will Willimon tells about the time his first small Methodist church decided to put a rough wood cross on the church lawn for Lent. The neighborhood complained. It was too depressing, they said.

Thinking about the people who line up to crowd into church on Easter, Willimon says he's always been tempted to put a sign out front during Holy Week: "No one gets in Sunday who wasn't here Friday."

"And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself," he said, and it is true. In spite of our revulsion at the suffering, our preference for focusing on the positive, there is something so compelling about this, so astonishing, so beautiful in the midst of its ugliness, so courageous, so passionate and loving, that it does, literally, he does, literally, draw us to himself.

In a new book, *The Last Week*, New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan call "crucifixion a form of Roman imperial terrorism, reserved for special victims—runaway slaves or rebel insurgents who subverted Roman law and order and thereby disturbed the Pax Romana. . . . As imperial terrorism, it was always as public as possible."

What exactly did Jesus do to warrant crucifixion? Borg and Crossan remind us that the Jews didn't do it, although they have been frequently blamed. They had no authority to execute anyone. In fact, Jewish subjects of the Roman occupation were frequent victims. Rome had occupied Israel/Palestine for decades, and there was an active insurgency, a persistent guerrilla operation that attacked Roman soldiers, Roman installations, at every opportunity. It is a phenomenon with which we have become tragically familiar. They were called the Zealots, and there is some speculation that Judas Iscariot may have been one of them. When they were caught, they were crucified. Borg and Crossan doubted very much that the Jewish authorities even convinced the Romans to do it. All Jews, even those who were cooperating and collaborating with the Romans, were appalled by and afraid of crucifixion. Every time a Jew was crucified, it was a public humiliation for all of them, a reminder of their subjection to Roman occupation. Jesus was one of them. The Romans crucified Jesus because they regarded him as a threat to their authority and power.

Was he guilty? No, not of advocating the violent overthrow of the state. He was not an insurrectionist. But yes, oh yes, say Borg and Crossan, he was guilty of challenging the authorities by claiming that their power, the power

to enforce and coerce, the power to intimidate and imprison, the power to torture and crucify, was in fact, nothing; that the final, ultimate, and only real power in this world is the power of love. Yes, he was guilty of that, and totalitarianism of any form—Roman, Fascist, Nazi, Communist, radical Islamist—has never been able to abide it.

Borg and Crossan say what got Jesus into trouble was simply his passion for the Kingdom of God, the very notion of which the Roman Imperial system found threatening—his passion for God and God's justice and his insistence throughout, from beginning to end, that the ultimate reality in this world is not fear but love, that the ultimate threat to human life—namely death—has been overcome by the power of love. And so the day he was crucified is known to us as Good Friday, God's Friday, because on that day we have seen the truth—that the world is redeemed by the love of God.

The message and meaning of the cross is that Jesus was right when he said the way to gain your life, live your life fully, is to give it away, in love, for his sake. The way to live is to take up a cross and carry it with courage and conviction. It's message is that Christian life, Christian mission, is always about giving, that Christian theology and belief and practice are not so much about conquering, converting, and growing as about giving, serving, and loving.

One of the things I like to do by way of my personal preparation for Holy Week and Easter is to spend some time with art, because art often understands and communicates and helps us understand truth that is simply bigger than any words or concepts or theories we have to try to describe it. So I get out Bach's Passion music:

> O Sacred Head now wounded
> With grief and shame weighed down . . .
>
> What language shall I borrow
> To thank thee, dearest friend . . .
>
> O make me thine forever:
> And should I fainting be,
> Lord, let me never, never
> Outlive my love to thee.

And I try to find some time to spend with the great medieval paintings of the crucifixion at the Art Institute. We were in New York last week, so I made my pilgrimage there, at the Metropolitan Museum, and pulled ourselves away from the lush beauty of the Impressionists and finished off in the medieval wing and the early Italian Renaissance. Most of the paintings from that period are either of the nativity or the crucifixion, both

events so full of indescribable mystery. Everyone painted the crucifixion: Jesus being nailed to the cross; Jesus on the cross, blood from his wounds, his hands and feet, his side, where he was pierced by a sword; angels, weeping women; Jesus being taken down from the cross; cowering disciples. It is sometimes said that those artists were simply morbid, obsessed with death and dying. I choose to believe it is more than that. I choose to believe that in an age not as fastidiously isolated from suffering and death as we are, they simply understood better the centrality of the cross for Christian faith and life and could somehow see the beauty of it more clearly than we do.

> "And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself."

The medieval artists had a way of occasionally painting themselves into pictures of the crucifixion. There in the crowd will be the artist, or recognizable town people, the mayor, the king, the bishop, sometimes even the pope. They understood that somehow this draws everyone in and that in some way we are all there.

What art understands and what we have trouble finding words big and profound enough to say is that the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are the fullest revelation of God, of the singular ultimate truth that is God, that we will ever have. What art understands is that on the cross of Jesus, God has come close, all the way down to us, to human life at its most human.

It is a truth every one of us needs sooner or later, a truth that is literally life-saving in the middle of dark times and tragic events.

At the end of *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills comes to Good Friday. He writes, "Dark and mysterious as is the whole matter of the Incarnation and the Passion, perhaps a single thing can help us think of them." And then Wills relates a simple personal anecdote. His young son woke up one night crying. He had had a bad dream, a nightmare. When Wills asked what was troubling him, the little boy said that a nun in his school had told the children that they would end up in hell if they sinned. "Am I going to hell?" the little boy asked his father. Wills writes, "There is not an ounce of heroism in my nature, but I instantly announced what any father, any parent would: 'All I can say is that if you're going there, I'm going with you.'"

That is the final truth: truth you can count on, stake your life on.

Last week New York City released, for the first time, some of the 911 tapes of calls from people trapped in the World Trade Center on 9/11. I read the long account in the paper yesterday morning, an account of hell on earth.

Panic, confusion, smoke, fire, crumbling stairways, broken windows, mounting desperation as callers pled for help and helpless dispatchers tried to reassure, encourage, and then, when it became clear that rescuers probably were not able to get there, to comfort.

The telephone dispatchers became, at that point, something like priests, the newspaper said.

> As the seconds ticked away and the end came near, sympathy shone through again and again. When terrible circumstances began to slip beyond human control, the operators reached further, “Just hold on one second, sir,” a police operator said to a man on the 105th floor. “Hold on. They’re coming. They’re working on it. My God, this—don’t worry. God is there. God is . . . God is . . . Don’t worry about it. God is—don’t worry.”

There is no place—no hell, no suffering, no threat, not even death—for which God does not say, “If you’re going, I’m going with you.”

“And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.”

Amen.